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THE SCENE-PAINTER'S WIFE

A Tale

BY THE AUTHOR OF "LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET," ETC.

"You wouldn't think it, to look at her now, sir," said the old clown, as he shook the ashes out of his blackened clay, "but madam was once as handsome a woman as you'd see for many a long day. It was an accident that spoilt her beauty."

The speaker was attached to a little equestrian company with which I had fallen in during a summer day's pedestrianism in Warwickshire. The troupe had halted at a roadside inn, where I was dawdling over my simple mid-day meal, and by the time I had smoked my cigar in his companionship, the clown and I were upon a footing of perfect friendliness.

I had been not a little struck by the woman of whom he spoke. She was tall and slim, and had something of a foreign look, as I thought. Her face was chiefly remarkable for the painful impression which it gave to a stranger. It was the face of a woman who had undergone some great terror. The sickly pallor of the skin was made conspicuous by the hectic brightness of the large black eyes, and on one cheek there was a scar—the mark of some deadly hurt inflicted long ago.

My new friend and I had strolled a little way from the inn, where the rest of the company were still occupied with their frugal dinner. A stretch of sunny common lay before us, and seemed to invite a ramble. The clown filled his pipe, and walked on meditatively. I took out another cigar.

"Was it a fall from horseback that gave her that scar?" I asked.

"A fall from horseback! Madame Delavanti! No, sir, that seam on her cheek was made by the claws of a tiger. It's rather a curious sort of story, and I don't mind telling it, if you'd like to hear it; but for the Lord's sake don't let her know I've been talking of her, if you should happen to scrape acquaintance with her when you go back to the inn."

"Has she such a dislike to being talked about?"

"I rather think she has. You see she's not quite right in the upper story, poor soul; but she rides beautifully, and doesn't know what fear means. You'd scarcely believe how handsome she looks at night when she's dressed for the ring. Her face lights up almost as well as it

used to do ten years ago, before she had the accident. Ah, she was handsome in those days, and used to be run after by all the gentlemen like mad. But she never was a bad lot, never—wild and self-willed, but never a wicked woman, as I'll stake my life. I've been her friend through thick and thin, when she needed a friend, and I've understood her better than others.

She was only twelve years old when first she came to us with her father, a noted lion-tamer. He was a man that drank hard now and then, and was very severe with her at such times; but she always had a brave spirit, and I never knew her to quail before him or before the beasts. She used to take her share in all the old man's performances, and when he died, and the lions were sold off, our proprietor kept a tiger for her to perform with. He was the cleverest of all the animals, but a queer temper, and it needed a spirit like Caroline Delavanti's to face him. She rode in the circus as well as performing with the tiger, and she was altogether the most valuable member of the company, and was very well paid for her work. She was eighteen when her father died, and within a year of his death she married Joseph Waylie, our scene-painter.

I was rather surprised at this marriage, for I fancied Caroline might have done better. Joe was thirty-five if he was a day—a pale sandy-haired fellow, not much to look at, and by no means a genius. But he was awfully fond of Caroline. He had followed her about like a dog ever since she came among us, and I thought she married him more out of pity than love. I told her so one day; but she only laughed, and said,

"He's too good for me, Mr. Waters, that's the truth. I don't deserve to be loved as he loves me."

The newly-married couple did indeed seem to be very happy together. It was a treat to see Joe stand at the wing and watch his wife through her performances, ready to put a shawl over her pretty white shoulders when she had done, or to throw himself between her and the tiger in case of mischief. She treated him in a pretty, patronising sort of way, as if he had been ever so much younger than her instead of twelve years her senior. She used to stand upon tiptoe and kiss him before all the company sometimes at rehearsal, much to his delight. He worked like a slave in the hope of improving his position as he improved in his art, and he thought nothing too good for his beautiful young wife. They had very comfortable lodgings about half a mile from the manufacturing town where we were stationed for the winter months, and lived as well as simple folks need live.

Our manager was proprietor of a second theatre, at a seaport town fifty miles away from the place where we were stationed; and when pantomime time was coming on, poor Joseph Waylie was ordered off to paint the scenery for this other theatre, much to his grief, as his work was likely to keep him a month or six weeks away from his wife. It was their first parting, and the husband felt it deeply. He left Caroline to the care of an old woman who took the money, and who professed a very warm attachment for Mrs. Waylie, or Madame Delavanti, as she was called in the bills.

Joseph had not been gone much more than a week when I began to take notice of a young officer who was in front every evening, and who watched Caroline's performance with evident admiration. I saw him one night in very close conversation with Mrs. Muggleton, the money-taker, and was not overpleased to hear Madame Delavanti's name men-

tioned in the course of their conversation. On the next night I found him loitering about at the stage-door. He was a very handsome man, and I could not avoid taking notice of him. On inquiry I found that his name was Jocelyn, and that he was a captain in the regiment then stationed in the town. He was the only son of a wealthy manufacturer, I was told, and had plenty of money to throw about.

I had finished my performance earlier than usual one night soon after this, and was waiting for a friend at the stage-door, when Captain Jocelyn came up the dark by-street, smoking his cigar, and evidently waiting for some one. I fell back into the shadow of the door, and waited, feeling pretty sure that he was on the watch for Caroline. I was right. She came out presently and joined him, putting her hand under his arm, as if it were quite a usual thing for him to be her escort. I followed them at a little distance as they walked off, and waited till I saw Joe's wife safe within her own door. The captain detained her on the doorstep talking for a few minutes, and would fain have kept her there longer, but she dismissed him with that pretty imperious way she had with all of us at times.

Now, as a very old friend of Caroline's, I wasn't going to stand this sort of thing; so I taxed her with it plainly next day, and told her no good could come of any acquaintance between her and Captain Jocelyn.

"And no harm need come of it either, you silly old fellow," she said. "I've been used to that sort of attention all my life. There's nothing but the most innocent flirtation between us."

"What would Joe think of such an innocent flirtation, Caroline?" I asked.

"Joe must learn to put up with such things," she answered, "as long as I do my duty to him. I

can't live without excitement, and admiration, and that sort of thing. Joe ought to know that as well as I do."

"I should have thought the tiger and the horses would have given you enough excitement, Caroline," I said, "without running into worse dangers than the risk of your life."

"But they don't give me half-enough excitement," she answered; and then she took out a little watch in a jewelled case, and looked at it, and then at me, in a half-boastful, half-anxious way.

"Why, what a pretty watch, Carry!" said I. "Is that a present from Joe?"

"As if you didn't know better than that!" she said. "Country scene-painters can't afford to buy diamond watches for their wives, Mr. Waters."

I tried to lecture her, but she laughed off my reproaches; and I saw her that night with a bracelet on her arm which I knew must be another gift from the captain. He was in a stage-box, and threw her a bouquet of choice flowers after her scene with the tiger. It was the prettiest sight in the world to see her pick up the flowers and offer them to the grim-looking animal to smell, and then snatch them away with a laugh, and retire, curtsying to the audience, and glancing coquetishly towards the box where her admirer sat applauding her.

Three weeks went by like this, the captain in front every night. I kept a close watch upon the pair, for I thought that, however she might carry on her flirtation, Joe's wife was true at heart, and would not do him any deliberate wrong. She was very young and very wilful, but I fancied my influence would go a long way with her in any desperate emergency. So I kept an eye upon her and her admirer, and there was rarely a night that I did not see the captain's back turned upon the door of Mrs. Way-

lie's lodgings before I went home to my own supper.

Joe was not expected home for another week, and the regiment was to leave the town in a couple of days. Caroline told me this one morning with evident pleasure, and I was overjoyed to find she did not really care for Captain Jocelyn.

"Not a bit, you silly old man," she said; "I like his admiration, and I like his presents, but I know there's no one in the world worth Joe. I'm very glad the regiment will be gone when Joe comes back. I shall have had my bit of fun, you know, and I shall tell Joe all about it; and as Captain Jocelyn will have gone to the other end of the world, he can't object to the presents—tributes offered to my genius, as the captain says in his notes."

I felt by no means sure that Joseph Waylie would consent to his wife's retaining these tributes, and I told her as much.

"O, nonsense," she said; "I can do what I like with Joe. He'll be quite satisfied when he sees Captain Jocelyn's respectful letters. I couldn't part with my darling little watch for the world."

When I went to the theatre next night, I found the captain standing talking to Caroline just inside the stage-door. He seemed very earnest, and was begging her to do something which she said was impossible. It was his last night in the town, you see, and I have very little doubt that he was asking her to run away with him—for I believe the man was over head and ears in love with her—and that she was putting him off in her laughing coquettish way.

"I won't take your answer now," he said very seriously. "I shall wait for you at the door to-night. You can't mean to break my heart, Caroline; the answer must be yes."

She broke away from him hurriedly. "Hark," she said, "there's

the overture; and in half an hour I must be upon the stage."

I passed the captain in the dark passage, and a few paces farther on passed some one else whose face I could not see, but whose short hurried breathing sounded like that of a person who had been running. We brushed against one another as we passed, but the man took no notice of me.

Half an hour afterwards I was lounging in a corner of the ring while Caroline went through her performances with the tiger. Captain Jocelyn was in his usual place, with a bouquet in his hand. It was New-Year's night, and the house was very full. I had been looking all round for some time, when I was startled by the sight of a face in the pit. It was Joseph Waylie's face, ashy pale and fixed as death—a face that meant mischief.

"He has heard something against his wife," I thought. "I'll run round to him directly I can get out of the ring, and make matters square. Some confounded scandal-monger has got hold of him, and has been poisoning his mind about Caroline and the captain." I knew there had been a good deal of talk in the theatre about the two—talk which I had done my best to put down.

Captain Jocelyn threw his bouquet, which was received with a coquettish smile and a bright upward glance that seemed to express profound delight. I knew that this was mere stage-play; but how must it have looked to the jealous man, glaring with fixed eyes from his place at the back of the pit! I turned to look at him as the curtain fell upon the stage, but he was gone. He was going round to speak to his wife, no doubt. I left the ring immediately, and went to prepare her for the interview, and, if needful, to stand between her and her husband's anger.

I found her at the wing, trifling with her bouquet in an absent way.

"Have you seen Joe?" I asked.

"No," she answered. "He hasn't come back, has he? I didn't expect him for a week."

"I know, my dear; but he was in front just now, looking as pale as a ghost. I'm afraid some one has been talking to him about you."

She looked rather frightened when I said this.

"They can't say any harm of me, if they speak the truth," she said. "I wonder Joe didn't come straight to me though, instead of going to the front of the house."

We were both wanted in the ring. I helped Caroline through her equestrian performance, and saw that she was a little nervous and anxious about Joe's return. She did not favour the captain with many more smiles that evening, and she told me to be ready for her at the stage-door ten minutes before the performance was over.

"I want to give Captain Jocelyn the slip," she said; "but I daresay Joe will come to me before I'm ready."

Joe did not appear, however, and she went home with me. I met the captain on my way back, and he asked me if I had been seeing Mrs. Waylie home. I told him yes, and that her husband had come home. Joe had not arrived at the lodgings, however, when Caroline went in, and I returned to the theatre to look for him. The stage-door was shut when I went back; so I supposed that Joe had gone home by another way, or was out drinking. I went to bed that night very uneasy in my mind about Caroline and her husband.

There was an early rehearsal of a new interlude next morning, and Caroline came into the theatre five minutes after I got there. She looked pale and ill. Her husband had not been home.

"I think it must have been a mistake of yours about Joe," she

said to me. "I don't think it could have been him you saw in the pit last night."

"I saw him as surely as I see you at this moment, my dear," I answered. "There's no possibility of a mistake. Joe came back last night, and Joe was in the pit while you were on with the tiger."

This time she looked really frightened. She put her hand to her heart suddenly, and began to tremble.

"Why didn't he come home to me?" she cried, "and where did he hide himself last night?"

"I'm afraid he must have gone out upon the drink, my dear."

"Joe never drinks," she answered.

While she stood looking at me with that pale scared face, one of our young men came running towards us.

"You're wanted, Waters," he said shortly.

"Where?"

"Upstairs in the painting-room."

"Joe's room!" cried Caroline. "Then he has come back. I'll go with you."

She was following me as I crossed the stage, but the young man tried to stop her.

"You'd better not come just yet, Mrs. Waylie," he said in a hurried way that was strange to him. "It's only Waters that's wanted on a matter of business." And then, as Caroline followed close upon us, he took hold of my arm and whispered, "Don't let her come."

I tried to keep her back, but it was no use.

"I know it's my husband who wants you," she said. "They've been making mischief about me. You sha'n't keep me away from him."

We were on the narrow stairs leading to the painting-room by this time. I couldn't keep Caroline off. She pushed past both of us, and ran into the room before we could stop her.

"Serve her right," muttered my companion. "It's all her doing."

I heard her scream as I came to the door. There was a little crowd in the painting-room round a quiet figure lying on a bench, and there was a ghastly pool of blood upon the floor. Joseph Waylie had cut his throat.

"He must have done it last night," said the manager. "There's a letter for his wife on the table yonder.—Is that you, Mrs. Waylie? A bad business, isn't it? Poor Joseph!"

Caroline knelt down by the side of the bench, and stopped there on her knees, as still as death, till the room was clear of all but me.

"They think I deserve this, Waters," she said, lifting her white face from the dead man's shoulder, where she had hidden it; "but I meant no harm. Give me the letter."

"You'd better wait a bit, my dear," I said.

"No, no; give it me at once, please."

I gave her the letter. It was very short. The scene-painter had come back to the theatre in time to hear some portion of that interview between Captain Jocelyn and his wife. He evidently had believed her much more guilty than she was.

"I think you must know how I loved you, Caroline," he wrote; "I can't face life with the knowledge that you've been false to me."

Of course there was an inquest. We worked it so that the jury gave a verdict of temporary insanity, and poor Joe was buried decently in the cemetery outside the town. Caroline sold the watch and the bracelet that Captain Jocelyn had given her, in order to pay for her husband's funeral. She was very quiet, and went on with the performances as usual a week after Joe's death, but I could see a great change in her. The rest of the company were very hard upon her, as I thought, blaming her for her husband's death, and she was under a cloud, as it were; but she looked as handsome as ever,

and went through all her performances in her old daring way. I'm sure, though, that she grieved sincerely for Joe's death, and that she had never meant to do him wrong.

We travelled all through the next summer, and late in November went back to Homersleigh. Caroline had seemed happier while we were away, I thought, and when we were going back, she confessed as much to me.

"I've got a kind of dread of seeing that place again," she said; "I'm always dreaming of the painting-room as it looked that January morning with the cold light streaming in upon that dreadful figure on the bench. The room's scarcely been out of my dreams one night since I've been away from Homersleigh; and now I dread going back as if—as if *he* was shut up there."

The room was not a particularly convenient one, and had been used for lumber after Joe's death. The man who came after him didn't care to paint there by himself all day long. On the first morning of our return, Caroline went up and looked in at the dusty heap of disused stage furniture and broken properties. I met her coming away from the room.

"O, Mr. Waters," she said to me with real feeling, "if he had only waited to hear me speak for myself! They all think I deserved what happened, and perhaps I did, as far as it was a punishment for my frivolity; but Joe didn't deserve such a fate. I know it was their malicious talk that did the mischief."

I fancied after this that her looks changed for the worse, and that she had a kind of nervous way in going through her equestrian performances, as if there was a fever upon her. I couldn't judge so well how she went through the tiger act, as I was never on the stage with her, but the brute seemed as submissive as ever. On the last day of the year she asked our manager to let her off for

the next night. "It's the anniversary of my husband's death," she said.

"I didn't know you were so precious fond of him," he answered with a sneer. "No, Mrs. Waylie, we can't afford to dispense with your services to-morrow night. The tiger act is one of our strong features with the gallery, and I expect a full house for New-Year's night."

She begged him very hard to let her off, but it was no use. There was no rehearsal on New-Year's morning, and she went to the little cemetery where Joe was buried, a three miles' walk in the cold and rain. In the evening, when she came to the wing her eyes were brighter than usual, and she shivered a good deal, more than I liked to see.

"I think I must have caught cold in the cemetery to-day," she said to me when I noticed this. "I wish I could have kept this night sacred—this one night—to my husband's memory. He has been in my mind so much to-day."

She went on, and I stood at the wing watching her. The audience applauded vociferously, but she did not make her accustomed curtsy; and she went about her work in a listless way that was very different from her usual spirited manner. The animal seemed to know this, and when she had got about half-way through her tricks with him, he began to respond to her word of command in a sulky unwilling manner that I didn't like. This made her angry, and she used her light whip more freely than usual.

One of the tiger's concluding tricks was a leap through a garland of flowers which Caroline held for him. She was kneeling in the centre of the stage with this garland in her hands, ready for the animal's spring, when her eyes wandered to the front of the house, and she rose suddenly with a shrill scream, and her arms outstretched wildly. Whether the sulky brute

thought that she was going to strike him or not, I don't know; but he sprang savagely at her as she rose, and in the next moment she was lying on the ground helpless, and the audience screaming with terror. I rushed upon the stage with half-a-dozen others, and we had the brute muzzled and roped in a few breathless moments, but not before he had torn Caroline's cheek and shoulder with his claws. She was insensible when we carried her off the stage, and she was confined to her bed three months after the accident with brain-fever. When she came among us again, she had lost every vestige of colour, and her face had that set look which you must have observed just now.

"The fright of her encounter with the tiger gave her that look," I said; "I don't much wonder at it."

"Not a bit of it," answered the clown. "That's the curious part of the story. She didn't think anything of her skirmish with the tiger, though it quite spoilt her beauty. What frightened her was the sight of her husband sitting in the pit, as he had sat there a year before, on the night of his death. Of course you'll say it was a delusion, and so say I. But she declares she saw him sitting amongst the crowd—amongst them, and yet not one of them, somehow, with a sort of ghastly light upon his face that marked him out from the rest. It was the sight of him that made her drop her garland and give that scream and rush that frightened the tiger. You see she had been brooding upon his death for a long time, and no doubt she conjured up his image out of her own brain, as it were. She's never been quite the same since that fever; but she has plenty of pluck, and there's scarcely anything she can't do now with Baber the tiger, and I think she's fonder of him than of any human creature, in spite of the scar on her cheek."